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THE SPARROW

By Patrick Hurley

In late spring of 1794, villagers along the Gold Coast of Ghana discovered an abandoned merchant ship run aground on their shore. The proper authorities were notified and the local British magistrate dispatched a military escort to investigate. The ship was identified as the Sparrow, which port records showed had departed from Cape Coast, Ghana only 16 days before.

When the military detail arrived, they reported finding the vessel alone on the sand, slightly leaning to one side. Her name was painted in red, glistening with ocean spray under the afternoon sun.

The soldiers hailed the ship and received no answer. Feeling a vague sense of unease, they threw grapnels over the rail and ascended the deck. After an hour of searching, the only remnant they had found of those aboard was a foul odor emanating from the cargo hold, a phenomena not uncommon on a slave ship. In the captain's quarters, they discovered that though the crew and cargo of the Sparrow had evidently vanished, the ship's log had not.

Every entry for the first week appears routine, until the final page. Flecked with brown

droplets and written in large, hurried script, it reads, GOD SAVE US THEY WON'T DIE THEY CANNOT DIE OH JESUS, THE DOOR—

The entry ends here. It was surmised that the crew had fallen victim to an uprising and that the fugitives had escaped after sailing the Sparrow back to shore.

16 days ago...

Ayawi looked out at the endless gray water and, though still on land, felt as if she was drowning. Waiting for them was a boat like none she had ever seen, a floating wooden castle with high, thin towers and great billowing banners.

Some of the others began to wail when they saw the sea, and their captors beat them with cudgels. Talk amongst the captives was forbidden. It mattered little to Ayawi. Most of the others came from different kraals, across the other side of the Volta River or beyond, and couldn't speak her tongue.

She had been bathing in the Volta, cleansing herself for the celebration of her impending womanhood, of her possible priesthood, when they found her. The taking had not been gentle.

In the beginning the beatings had come so often, Ayawi had pretended her skin was covered with nwagin, the river-clay her people used to make pottery and brick. Nwagin, gift of the Volta, used to seal the fire in its cage for the smithy to make iron weapons. Every beating was a pass in the clay oven, making her harder and stronger, more impervious to pain.

There was one amongst the prisoners whom Ayawi could understand. He was dark and wrinkled, with gray hair like the sea. The swirling and curving symbols on his body proclaimed that he was bokor, a sorcerer of the voudon. What madness had possessed these devils to take a

bokor was beyond Ayawi's understanding, but she knew it would doom them all. A bokor's curse was as implacable as death itself.

After he had been captured, the bokor muttered to himself constantly. He focused his burning stare on the manacles binding his hands and feet. One day, Ayawi overheard him say, "Loa Samedi, this cursed furshuk metal will not respond to my spells! So if it be my curse to die, let me come back. Let me return through the other side as one of your jackals sons of the night!"

The next day she heard him muttering, "Never die. Never die. Never die!"

The men on board the castle-boat were the first white men Ayawi had ever seen. Their skin was the color of goat's milk, like pale cream mixed with pig blood. To her, they looked half-dead, as though a wampir drained away their life. Even their hair was lifeless, pale and straight like dead summer grass.

With hard words and harder blows, they forced the captives down into the ship's belly. One woman refused to come aboard. In full view of everyone, one of the pale men pulled out a sword, and stabbed her in the stomach.

The rest of the boarding went smoothly.

They were chained to one another in rows, with berths only inches apart. As the hold's lid slowly closed, sealing off the light, great sobbing cries arose from below deck.

Ayawi sat down in the pit, surrounded by darkness, sweat, and fear. She wondered, from within her wall of clay, where they were bound. She wondered if their final destination was hell.

Edward watched as the kaffirs were led onto the Sparrow. He hated this leg of the

voyage. The bloody monkeys would always piss themselves before getting stowed below deck, then vomit everywhere after the ship left port. Disgusting.

He'd only signed onto a slaver once before. Though he'd come away from the trip well paid, Edward vowed that he would never sail on another. That was before Nell took sick, before he'd spent what was meant to be the money for their house on useless doctors.

After she was gone, there was nothing to keep him in London. A man he knew told him about a ship leaving port, and the next day he was signed on to the Sparrow as a mid-shipman.

That night, as the Sparrow sailed away from Africa, Edward sat off to one corner, trying not to think about what lay beneath his feet. What bothered him most were their eyes as he lowered them into the hold. He took another sip of whiskey. It was his eighth, perhaps ninth pull, and still he couldn't escape their stares. Nell's stare. He'd heard them sob as they barred the door to the hold, and promised himself this was the last time he'd sign on with a slaver. After this he was done.

14 days ago...

The smell was horrible. The bowels of the ship were coated in a thin scum of shit, piss, and blood. As the boat rocked from side to side, the liquid spilt across the floor, pooling in crevices and lapping against those who lay senseless on the ground, already on the verge of succumbing to death.

Ayawī sat in a dark corner, hugging her knees. She could see by the dim light through the planks above them, could hear the constant noise of waves against the walls. If only she could seal her nostrils with *nwagin*.

The bokor had grown worse. He rocked back and forth, constantly chanting the same words over and over. His eyes had become stained with yellow madness. It seemed to Ayawi that she could hear his chant echoing in the darkness, could hear it whispered on the wind.

12 days ago...

Edward was worried. Something was happening on the ship, and he couldn't say what it was. At the start of every passage, they always lashed one negro as an example to the rest. They had chosen this crazy old kaffir who O'Neill claimed had given him an evil eye. The savage was out of his gourd though, wouldn't stop chanting his mumbo jumbo. As they whipped him, his voice only grew louder, until it sounded like the screaming of an animal. Edward fancied he could hear it on the wind even now.

The whip man flayed the kaffir's back nearly to the bone, spattering blood everywhere. And still the bastard wouldn't stop babbling. Even as they dumped him into the hold, half-senseless and leaking blood, he continued to chant. For hours, his whispers echoed up from the hold, seeping through the floors of the deck.

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It happened in the night. After they had flung the bokor back into prison, he continued his mantra until finally, his eyes closed. Ayawi felt a tinge of relief. Perhaps the curse would be averted if he died. She listened to his faltering breath, waiting for the rise of his chest to stop. The darkness around him seemed thicker somehow.

She must have fallen asleep, for she had a dream in which she was walking through mist, following the old man's voice. Gradually it grew louder and louder until the wind seemed to

howl, “Cannot die! Will not die!”

Ayawi sat up. The hold was filled with late night quiet. She looked once more on the magician. His eyes remained closed and his chest no longer rose up and down. She felt no relief at his death, only fear.

Then his eyes opened.

A deep rasping moan, sounding as though it came from the depths of hell, issued from his bloody mouth and the bokor’s body began to twitch.

And then he rose.

Ayawi’s armor was shattered. Screaming, she fled away from those jackal eyes and hid amongst a sleeping pile of the prisoners. Some of them stirred. Yellow eyes gleamed as they peered about the room, and a hungry groan rang out in the shadows.

11 days ago...

Last night was terrible.

Edward had been roused by the sound of screaming below deck. Taking a torch and sword, he and several others went down into the hold to investigate.

What they saw was a thing of nightmare. The old man whom they had whipped must have been driven insane, for he sat atop a pile of dead slaves, gnawing at their bones. The rest of the Africans huddled against the walls, screaming.

Edward looked aghast at the crazed slave. Had one man really done all this? Red blood dribbled from his gray mouth. Yellow eyes, filled with hunger, stared at them.

In the end, the whole crew was needed to deal with the lunatic. It had a madman’s

strength and didn't seem to feel pain. They shot him with pistols, stabbed him with swords; beat him with clubs and torches.

Still, he would not fall.

Finally, after he had been mutilated beyond recognition, they dragged him to the deck and tossed his remains overboard. Even then, though his body was hacked to pieces, his head nearly detached at the neck, even then he continued to struggle.

The captain ordered them to dispose of the rest of the bodies and make sure that none of the other slaves had been infected with the "bush madness", as he called it. Afterward, he ordered triple rations of grog for the whole crew. As the men sat sipping their whiskey and shuddering, the ship's medic began dressing their wounds. The lunatic had bitten more than half the crew.

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And as the Sparrow sailed away from the foul spot where they had heaved the bokor overboard, the gray water churned and bubbled beneath a fiery morning sky. Suddenly, a single rotted hand broke the water's surface, reaching and reaching... Until another wave crashed down and the hand sank beneath the sea with a final gurgling moan...

10 days ago...

Ayawī knew worse was coming. Besides the dead, only a few of her comrades had been wounded by the bokor. As those poor souls began to sicken, they were thrown overboard by the pale devils. But Ayawī knew they were not the only ones bitten.

9 days ago...

They were in trouble. All of the men who'd been bitten by the crazed slave had taken sick, and were unable to get out of bed. The ship's medic was doing but he could, but Edward could tell from the look on the man's face there was little hope. That day, the slaves refused to look at any of the crew when taken aloft for their daily exercise.

It was as though they were afraid of something.

8 days ago...

Edward awoke once more to moans and screams. Strapping on a cutlass and taking a pistol, he stepped outside. The sky was clear and the sea calm. Edward felt a moment's tranquility as he gazed up at the stars.

Then he looked down on the deck and nearly went mad.

It was as though Hell itself held a feast on the Sparrow, and his shipmates were the main course. Yet no Africans partook of this grisly meal. With growing horror, Edward realized all the cannibals had white skin, not black. Screams of pain echoed throughout the Sparrow, as well as a constant moaning.

Edward heard a much louder, much closer moan. O'Neill had been one of the first bitten by the insane old man. Now he looked half-dead himself. A terrible stench wafted off him, the festering wound on his neck oozed pus. His eyes were covered in a white miasma.

O'Neill moaned again and raised his hands toward Edward. His fingers had become bloody claws of raw bone. Edward didn't hesitate. The whole world had gone mad, but damned if he'd become one of those creatures. He raised his pistol and shot O'Neill point blank in the

face. To Edward, it seemed that his shipmate's head exploded in slow motion. Yet the shambling, grotesque thing that had once been O'Neill did not fall.

A banshee's howl was rent from Edward's throat. He leapt forward and brought his cutlass down with both hands. The Irishman's body seemed to peel open. And still it moved. Again and again, Edward hacked down with a strength born of terror and madness, until there was nothing left of his friend but gore. He climbed to his feet, growling. In the darkness, covered in blood, he looked more animal than man.

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Ayawí and the others heard the screams of the pale devils. She had once heard a village elder compare the curse of the voudon to an elephant gone mad. Once unleashed, there was no telling where it would direct its fury. You could only hope to get out of its way. She knew it would not be long before the accursed ones turned their attention towards her and the others. At least, she thought with some satisfaction, these ghouls would devour themselves first. It was no less than the animals deserved. After a time, they could only hear the moans of the undead. There were no more screams.

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The key to stopping the creatures, Edward found, was to chop their heads off. Without eyes, the horrible shambling bodies couldn't see and after that, it was only a matter of hacking off limbs. He'd thrown away his useless pistol and had found a hatchet to compliment his cutlass. Well for him that his father was a butcher and had taught him the trade before he left for

the sea. Hiding in the dark corners, moving from shadow to shadow, Edward silently dispatched three of the walking corpses. One had been his friend Tom. Two nights ago, they had been playing cards. Tonight, Edward cut his head off with an axe.

As he stalked the Sparrow, he heard whispering coming from the storeroom. Quiet as a panther, Edward crept down the mainstay and announced in a calm voice, “It’s Ed.”

With some hesitancy, the door creaked open. The captain and some of the others peered at him, eyes wide with fright and red with drink.

“God Almighty Edward, you look half rabid yourself covered in guts and bluid! Had ya not announced yourself, I’d have shot you in a blink.”

“Bullets don’t work,” Edward replied as they bolted the door behind him. He held up his bloody hatchet and cutlass, and then laid them on the table. “These do.”

The men stared at him, then began recounting what each had seen.

“It’s like rabies,” one sailor muttered, “except they carries on after they’re dead.”

“Bloody darkies,” the other muttered. “Bloody fucking darkies.”

“Its not them’s infected now,” Edward said.

“Yar, we know,” the captain said, “I’d left Rogers in my quarters to finish the log while I checked the stores. Packston got him. When we four saw what was happening on deck, well, we bolted door here and laid low. We’ve been trying to suss out a plan and...”

Drinking yourselves into a stupor, Edward thought. Out loud, he said, “Alright, then here is what we’ll do...”

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The dead began beating on the walls of the hold. Heedless of the damage to their bodies, they pounded with their feet, hands, and heads. Ayawi felt as though she was in the hollow interior of a drum. The blows kept an eerie cadence, almost in time with the dead bokor’s chant.

Soon, the wood began to warp and crack. A mangled hand burst through and clawed about mindlessly. Ayawi held the chain that bound her wrists and smashed down on the arm, breaking it in one blow. The others stared at her in amazement, for a moment forgetting the growing cracks in the walls. Ayawi saw their stares and made a decision. If they were to die, they would not die like this: confined, corralled into a pen like beasts to slaughter. She closed her eyes and the storeroom vanished. Deep beneath the spirit-clay armoring her skin, Ayawi reached into the place where her heartfire burned and pulled out a glowing ember. Those in the hold gaped at the witch girl. Her eyes had rolled back into her head, and the chains in her hands seemed to hiss as though it burned.

The ember of her heart’s fire caused Ayawi to cry out in pain. She screamed words in a language she didn’t know, and suddenly her shrieking became a song.

Yet this was no voudon curse, no spell of death and destruction.

Her voice rose above the relentless assault on the walls, it soared beyond the confines of the deck, and perhaps reached the stars themselves. It was the answer to the bokor’s mad spell. It

spoke of light, of hope in the face of despair, of beauty beyond the evil of man. It welcomed death as the final step in a natural cycle.

The other captives listened, and for a moment, their hearts beat unafraid. Soon they found that they could understand Ayawi's words, and, almost helpless to stop themselves, joined in her song.

The chain binding her wrists glowed white-hot in the darkness. Gripped by a power far greater than any curse, Ayawi marched toward the lock and smashed it open. The lid fell back with sparks and the sound of thunder and the former slaves clamored through the opening, still singing.

#

They had been so close, so bloody close! While their former shipmates were occupied with trying to eat the cargo, Edward and the remnant of the crew had thought to use the diversion as a chance to escape on one of the launch boats. And then, the fucking slaves had started singing and somehow burst out onto the deck right in front of them, with the rabid monsters followed close behind.

The sailors watched from the shadows as the undead surrounded the kaffirs. There were still a score or so of the creatures left. They felt no pain, and the slaves had no weapons. Edward felt a pull on his arm.

“Quickly now, while the bloody savages have them distracted,” whispered the captain. Edward hesitated.

“What?” the captain said. “You’re going to help them? Listen to that bloody singing fool! It’s the same godless mumbo jumbo that caused all this in the first place. They brought evil onto my ship, I say.”

Edward turned back to the scene of carnage. He watched his former crewmates, now transformed into creatures less than animals. He looked at the kaffirs, fighting for their lives. Then he turned back to the captain and his men, their eyes bloodshot, their skin reeking of booze and fear.

Evil had been brought onto the Sparrow, he realized, and not by the Africans.

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Though Ayawi’s song had bewildered the dead, it didn’t put them to rest. And there were still many dead left. Tottering on the brink of exhaustion, their song was beginning to fade.

7 Days Ago...

As the sun rose in the east, the pale devil came.

He descended upon the creatures like a bloody archangel, his eyes reflecting the clear blue sky. Edward laid about with sword and axe, cutting a wide swath in his former comrades’ ranks. He screamed defiance and tears rolled down his face. Ayawi and her remaining companions gave a glad cry. They picked up scattered weapons joined the fight.

Finally, after a few hours, it was done. Though many of them had perished in the attempt, they had cleansed the Sparrow of the undying. As the last body was thrown overboard, Ayawi and Edward leaned on their weapons and looked at each other.

“Its finished,” Edward whispered, then winced. “Well, almost.”

“Come here!” he called. Ayawi followed him, not understanding. He handed her his cutlass, and directed the blade to his neck. She looked at him incredulously.

“You have to,” Edward said. Slowly, he held up his trembling arm for her inspection. She saw the gaping bite mark, red with blood, already blackening around the edges. She took the sword from him, nodding. Tears were running down Edward’s face, and Ayawi felt an unlikely pity for the man.

“I never meant things to come out like this,” Edward said. He turned and looked at the rising sun. “I’d always thought that—“

But what it was that Edward thought would never be known, for in that very instant, Ayawi sliced his head from his body. For several seconds, as his head tumbled into the sea, it seemed to Edward that he was floating. He thought he could see Nell’s smiling face. And then there was a splash and everything went dark.

Ayawi watched the white man’s body fall overboard, her tears now coming.

“What now?” one of other prisoners asked, treating her with awe as she brought the cutlass casually to her side.

“Now?” Ayawi repeated, looking east towards where Edward had been staring.

“Now we return home.”

Epilogue

The men in the dinghy looked back at the dwindling shape of the Sparrow. *That idiot Edward*, the captain thought, *why would he die for a bunch of animals?* Looking over the supplies in the boat, he calculated that they had just enough to get back to the shore. The sooner the better. The bite on his leg was beginning to look real bad...